

In Praise of Limiting Praise

Colleen Drobot

We all want to rejoice when our child does something wonderful or achieves a goal. It is a natural part of being a proud parent. We celebrate their endeavors and want to acknowledge them. But when acknowledgment and recognition turn into praise in hopes they will continue to raise the bar, or if we recognize our child only when they do something well, we could be headed for trouble.

If we give our child attention when they do well, we also need to show them appreciation and affection when they don't succeed. It is so important that we provide comfort and convey how much we love them, even if they fail or make mistakes. When we give love and attention freely, no matter how well they do, a child can rest in the awareness that our love is unconditional. They don't need to measure up to earn our love. We offer it without strings attached. When children know this, they feel valued for who they are, not what they do.

I always felt my mother got this right. She never seemed to be overly ecstatic when I brought home good reports cards or received honors in piano. She had a way of showing her happiness but I always knew my success did not determine her well-being. She was just as warm and welcoming when I didn't succeed. I remember receiving quite a bit of praise from my teachers in the elementary grades. Even though part of me enjoyed it, I also felt uncomfortable, feeling as though I might fall off the pedestal at any moment and expose my imperfection. What if I couldn't always do so well? Praise can actually backfire and cause insecurity.

Another problem happens when we over-focus on performance. Children are often full of wonderful emergent energy where they want to play, discover, achieve a personal goal, or create. When we step in and praise a child for their endeavor, the child's energy may turn away from the enjoyment of their activity and focus on our approval. When this happens, the emergent energy, where the child is learning autonomy, new boundaries, and acquiring a sense of themselves, is interrupted and they pursue our applause and attention instead.

I have experienced this even as an adult. My husband and I took up ballroom dancing once. My husband turned out to be a natural and the instructor praised us (him), and used us an example of how to dance. At first we were just having fun, excited about learning the steps, and enjoying our new skills. But after the heaps of praise, I started to focus on the instructor's attention. I felt pressure to 'perform' and when she wandered by, I became very conscious of her judgment and approval rather than on the enjoyment of learning something new. Luckily, I could laugh at myself and joke with my husband about it. But for a child, their parent's approval is serious business.

We need to preserve the precious times our children are discovering their world, uninhibited by our stamp of approval. We don't need to reinforce this wonderful energy with our praise; the child will naturally want to venture forth if we have provided for their emotional needs of contact and closeness. When a child wants to show us an accomplishment or creation, we can celebrate this. We can honor their focus, value their enthusiasm, and share in their excitement.

Whether praise is interrupting our child's creative solitude or conveying that our acceptance of them is contingent upon success, we need to be conscious and cautious of its power.

Dr. Neufeld sums up the dangers of praise with a wonderful analogy. He says, "Praise is like dessert. Dessert is fine when we have taken in the nourishment of the main course; but we run into problems when it replaces our dinner. Like dessert, praise should never be the main course."

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